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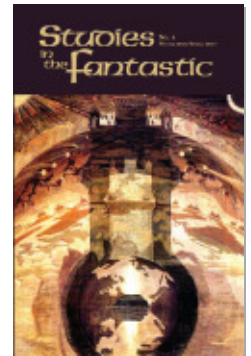
## How to Build a Transsexual Superman: Reading Superman's Emergence Alongside Histories of Eugenic Science and Gender Confirmation Surgeries

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Studies in the Fantastic, Number 4, Winter 2016/Spring 2017, pp. 1-23 (Article)

Published by University of Tampa Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/sif.2016.0006>



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# How to Build a Transsexual Superman: Reading Superman's Emergence Alongside Histories of Eugenic Science and Gender Confirmation Surgeries

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*"Fortunately, what has been marred in the flesh—can be made perfect in metal..."* —Luthor, *Superman's Metropolis*

*Superman's Metropolis*, published under DC Comics' Elseworlds imprint, is a comic book retelling of the Superman origin story set within the cinematic world of Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* (1927). In this alternative universe, evil scientist Luthor (Lex Luthor) attempts to suppress a potential class uprising by creating a robotic replica of Lois (Lane), the revolution's undercity leader. Built to dismantle the workers' united front, the robotic double Futura symbolizes Luthor's obsessive drive to maintain control over the city by attempting to perfect the laboring human form. No longer able to sustain his mechanic city of steam and heat on the backs of the undercity human workers, Luthor needs an alternative to the physical weakness of the flesh. It is through the creation of Futura—his formidable woman of steel—that Luthor intends to usher in a new age of efficient production. Where flesh can no longer survive, metal will serve.

However, Luthor's plans are quickly challenged by Clark, son of Jon Kent, the Great Architect and original Master of Metropolis. After learning about the social inequalities that plague the city, Clark becomes determined to unravel Luthor's grasp on the city and to destroy his robotic creation. With the help of his friend (Jimmy) Olson, Clark discovers the alien vessel that transported him to Earth; as a repressed memory quickly flashes across his consciousness, he suddenly realizes his "star born powers" and vows to use them to protect the city (37). Adopting the heroic moniker The Super-Man, Clark engages Luthor in a battle for the city, ultimately destroying Futura in a tank of molten metal and vanquishing the evil scientist with Lois's aid.

Similar to Lang's original film, this comic book adaptation is meant to be a comment on labor and class during the age of industrialization. Yet, the narrative can also be read in more general terms as a commentary on the malleability of the human body and its subsequent potential. Potential within the comic text and the film is measured in terms of work and capital, how much the body can do in the shortest amount of time to produce the greatest amount of physical and monetary output. However, one can argue that potential also denotes the possibility for morphologic change, in other words what the body can be made into. What is the potential of flesh?

Lutor's attempt to defy the limits of the human body invokes the image of early- to mid-twentieth-century eugenic scientists who also sought to increase human potential via the study of biology. The connection between Lutor's actions and the horrific images of non-consenting human experimentation are unavoidable. Yet, what may also be evoked by this connection are the ambivalent discourses eugenics raise about the body's ability to be transformed. For instance, within the narrative arc of the comic text, it is only after Lutor succeeds in building Futura that Clarc can discover his own identity as the symbolic man of steel. Within the narrative sequence, Lutor's creation of Futura preempts Clarc's own discovery of self; Lutor's actions open up the necessary narrative and discursive space within the comic for alternative understandings of bodies, specifically bodies that challenge the connection between the stasis of the flesh and humanity.

The interpolation of the Superman narrative into the film *Metropolis* is an imaginative act that attempts to interweave two alternative universes in order to highlight the underlying themes of identity and corporeal malleability in both texts. This creative exercise, I would argue, is not merely a coincidental interlinking but a purposeful attempt to reveal the very real impact eugenic science has had on the character of Superman. In this essay, I undertake a similar task. It is my aim to create another alternative version of Superman's origin story, one that specifically disrupts seemingly stable and normative histories of the hero's emergence. Here, I extend the connections made in *Superman's Metropolis* to consider how the eugenics movement's investment in and development of sex reassignment surgeries (now known as gender confirmation surgeries) markedly affects the ways in which we understand the emergence of the Superman

narrative. While at first these may seem to be widely incompatible histories, I argue that the narratives of transsexual surgeries (surgical procedures that modify an individual's primary or secondary sex characteristics) fold neatly into the Superman origin story—so neatly that it seems odd for this connection to have been previously missed.<sup>1</sup>

What is at stake in the reading-together of these seemingly disparate histories is the very materiality of the body, and more specifically, the artistic representation of such material. As George L. Hersey notes, the comic book is one out of many Western art forms that reinforce a preference for a particularly gendered, racial, and classed ideal. In his exploration of cultural standards of beauty, Hersey charts how various bodily proportions have been continually recycled throughout time to reaffirm particular material standards of idealism. Though these standards alter slightly throughout time, their continued proliferation points to an overwhelming need to critically interrogate how we come to visualize and construct the body. To this end, this article is concerned not only with creating a reading-together of these histories, but also with intervening into the lasting legacies of the image of Superman as a white, cis-heterosexual.<sup>2</sup> By problematizing these interpretations, I seek to undermine normative understandings of the character and challenge his seemingly rightful place within cis-heteronormative culture.

## The Role of Eugenics within Comic History

As originally developed in the late nineteenth-century by Francis Galton, cousin to Charles Darwin, eugenics as a theory and as a practice understood that biological factors, not environmental influences, could explain and regulate racial, cultural, and social differences between populations (Turda 19). In Galton's works, science is a means to an end: By examining both mental and physical hereditary qualities, one can eventually develop said qualities to their utmost advantage (Burke and Castaneda 6). Or, in Galton's own words, eugenics is "the science of improving the stock" (qtd. in Turda 20). The assumption here is that one can hierarchize humanity based on an individual's biological contributions to the national body and to the species at large (Turda 20).

While the eugenics movement was primarily concerned with maintaining a virile national body, and therefore curbing the amount of so-called pollutants (i.e. racialized outsiders as well as marginalized insiders, such as persons with physical disabilities, mental illnesses, and/or criminal pasts [Bashford and Levine 6; Turda 20]), as Hersey notes, scientists and lobbyists were also heavily invested in the proliferation of beauty. For Galton in particular, one's physical beauty became an overt symbol of one's superior physicality and moral character, a proper genetic marker of one's worthiness (Hersey 103). The visual marker of the face is of key importance to Galton, whose interest in physiognomy led him to pioneer a photographic technique called composite photography. Hersey describes Galton's method and the subsequent results as follows:

His photographs were made by successively projecting lightly exposed facial images of different people on the same plate. For members of the same family the result was what might be called a family face, one in which the transient or uncharacteristic features of single individuals came out underexposed while the dominant traits, which reappeared in face after face, showed up in exact repetition and thus achieved firm contrast. (104)

Using this technique, Galton is able to characterize and identify various classes of supposed degenerates, including criminals, prostitutes, and the mentally ill. In identifying the distinct facial characteristics of each grouping, Galton attempts to create a visual database or lexicon of worrisome physical features. The assumed purpose is that the creation of a coherent set of physical properties would allow him (and others) to recognize morally dubious characters at a glance (Hersey 104).<sup>3</sup> The visibility of the body thus plays a key role in eugenics as it becomes the primary site and signifier of a person's inherent moral worth and value. By infusing the eugenics movement with a continued preoccupation with the visual, Galton is able to position the body (and its genetic and biological makeup) as another malleable and designable object that ought to be shaped and enhanced according to a rigid set of (racist, ableist, and classist) visual codes.

As the movement evolved from the late nineteenth to the early twentieth century, human malleability or plasticity became a quintes-

sential theme in formal eugenic literature as well as in popular accounts of the subject. For example, one *New York Times* article published in 1929 details advancements made by eugenic scientists and notes that “all living matter is plastic” (Garbedian xx8). Here, the human body is not only presented as another workable material, but a material that must be regulated and reconfigured in order to fulfill the movement’s ideal vision of tomorrow. Indeed, the abstract future time and space of tomorrow often figures in these popular writings as the movement’s symbolic end goal. Tomorrow promises endless possibilities for the human body, while simultaneously demanding the dutiful compliance of today’s people to undergo scientific (and at times surgical) intervention and modification. In this respect, the motif of tomorrow is deeply enmeshed with the theme of human potential, or, in other words, the potential of the flesh. I highlight the eugenic investment in the abstract temporal space of tomorrow not only to demonstrate the movement’s preoccupation with the future human ideal, but also as a means of foreshadowing Superman’s own eventual title as the Man of Tomorrow.<sup>4</sup> Though the alignment of Superman with eugenic idealism, which will be problematized later in this article, I wish to underscore the important discursive linkages between medical interventions and the birth of tomorrow’s supermen.

Further evidence of these connections is shown in the above-mentioned *New York Times* article. “Science Pictures a Superman of Tomorrow” by H. Gordon Garbedian gives a synopsis of the various technologies eugenic scientists utilize to alter human genetics in the pursuit of biological, anatomical, and social perfection. It is worth quoting this article at length in order to demonstrate the extent to which this publication summarizes the discursive forces that link the concept of tomorrow, the character of Superman, and the development of transsexual identities. Here, the perfected human form Superman comes to embody is simultaneously contingent upon the same technologies of the future that will lead to gender confirmation surgeries.

In his opening Garbedian states, “From the dawn of history, when the primitive man strolled from his cave [...] mankind has dreamed of achieving the superman. [...] Now science provokes serious thought by envisioning real probabilities of a superior race of human beings” (xx8). This “superior” human, Garbedian goes on to suggest,

is coming to fruition through “brilliant” experiments which have brought about startling revelations regarding how the “form, color, size, structure, habits and sex of certain animals may be changed or reversed” (xx8). He goes on to elaborate on such possibilities, citing a case from Dr. John A. Abel of John Hopkins University, an institution that will later go on to be one of the first to perform gender confirmation surgeries in the United States.

The example may be cited here of the case of a young woman under the observation of [Dr. Abel] whose sex characteristics of a woman were changed to those of a man by excess secretions of ductless glands caused by a tumor. Dr. Abel points out that all her secondary feminine characteristics, physical and psychological, were of the opposite sex. Her normal sex characteristics were restored by an operation on the tumor. (xx8)

As cued earlier, technologies of the body, specifically regarding one’s sexual morphology, are explicitly linked to the production of tomorrow. Therefore, a discussion of tomorrow and of a potential future race of supermen is incomplete without addressing categories of normality that are—as this example makes clear—both explicitly and implicitly based on the eugenics movement’s assumptions regarding the properly sexed and gendered body.

The language around tomorrow and the case study Garbedian explores are further highlighted by the image that accompanies the article’s text. Appearing in the image’s foreground is a scientist bent over, working at a microscope. Various tubes and jars surround him, while an array of human skulls lay organized on a shelf in the background. Looming above the scientist, at the image’s centre, is as Christina Cogdell describes, “a massive Hellenistically-styled, nude male sculpture, almost in the pose of Rodin’s *Thinker*, which presumably was to be the eventual ideal outcome of the scientist’s efforts” (200). Where Cogdell sees an explicit connection to the Ancient Grecian representation of human perfection via the medium of sculpture, I interpret a Gothic Promethean creation rising out of the metaphorical fire with a fist clenched in conquest or rage. The monstrous figure lacks the refinement and tranquility associated with Rodin’s sedate thinker; instead it is a body clenched and tensed in shame

(as it hides its face), pain (as its abdominal muscles contract), and/or anger (with fist held high). Washed in black and white, and foregrounding the laboratory tools of a calculating scientist, the image could substitute as a moment from Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein: The Modern Prometheus*.

Predating the idealistic aspirations of the eugenics movement by nearly a century, Shelley's novel is credited as being the first work (in the modern Western world) to develop the concept of the superman (Andrae 86; Coogan, "Superhero" 126). In addition, the novel is also credited as being the literary cornerstone of the superhero genre (Coogan, "Superhero" 126). As read by comics scholar Peter Coogan, Frankenstein's monster symbolically threatens to replace humanity with a "separate and possibly superior species" ("Superhero" 128). Rather than understanding the creature as simply dead flesh made living, Coogan reads the figure as a decedent of the human race, whose very materiality represents the death of humanity as a whole ("Superhero" 129). What Shelley's novel offers then is not a eugenic utopian vision of tomorrow, but a corrupt nightmare of human hubris; here, Doctor Frankenstein and his monster (the former perhaps even more so) signal a moral deterioration of humanity.

Although figuring into the explicit history of Superman as a peripheral note, Shelley's ideas regarding extraordinary beings implicitly informed a number of texts that historians do credit as the direct inspirations for the Man of Steel. One of the most notable examples is Edgar Rice Burroughs' *Tarzan*, which came to Siegel and Shuster in the form of Hal Foster's comic-strips of the same name (1928). The impact *Tarzan* had on Siegel and Shuster is most commonly attributed to Shuster's own interest in bodybuilding (Jones 70). A popular pursuit in the 1920s, bodybuilding offered young boys the ability to obtain a physique much like that of their comic-strip heroes. More importantly though, bodybuilding became one of the many mechanisms that sought to discipline and control the body on behalf of the nation. Under the banner of eugenics, the body became something to regulate and control. As Fae Brauer and Anthea Callen note in their introduction to *Art, Sex and Eugenics*, movement, gesture, exercise, posture, and speed all came under surveillance through inspections, reports, surveys, measurements and imaging (6). For eugenicists, a healthy body signaled a person free of physical and moral contamina-



tion, and it was therefore imperative to encourage citizens to radiate such health by participating in proper nutritional and hygienic habits, and physical cultures such as bodybuilding (Brauer and Callen 23). The dispersion of promotional imagery of the physically fit, often male body, in visual culture served to normalize and naturalize the radiantly healthy white body. Additionally, such imagery sought to inspire citizens to emulate such fitness goals in order to “accelerate evolution and enhance Western civilization” (Brauer and Callen 7, 24–25).

Some of the most commonly photographed and displayed bodies were those of male athletes, often posed in various stages of undress. The popularity of the athlete’s body in 1920s visual culture could be seen in various widespread publications of the time, eventually culminating a decade later in 1930 with the creation of *The Superman* magazine. Founded by Lt. Col. Graham Seton Hutchinson, the magazine used revealing photographs of men posing alone and together as a means of “heroizing and aestheticizing the male body” (Brauer and Callen 27). The overt sexuality of such images was tempered by the scientific lens in which they were presented; nudity was crucial in assessing and celebrating the healthy, white body (Brauer and Callen 26).

With the pervasive imagery of elite, athletic bodies on display for consumers’ gazes, coupled with eugenic discourses of beauty, cleanliness and physical conditioning, it is understandable why young Shuster may have been attracted to Tarzan, a quintessential model of bodybuilding culture. Foster’s drawing of the figure—almost always bare chested with a neat loin cloth covering the genitals—exposes Tarzan’s body in a similar manner as the men in Hutchinson’s magazine. It allows readers to gaze at his body, carefully inspecting his ideal physicality. Interestingly, Tarzan is referred to in the original pulp novels as a “superman” (Coogan “Superhero” 158). His physique is not only a testament to a heroic regiment of physical activity, but also to the figure’s eugenically ideal white, colonial ancestry (Coogan “Superhero” 159). The character’s super-ness is then a result both of his well-formed body and of the marked racial superiority associated with it (as juxtaposed against the wild, uncivilized apes who share his environment). The overt racial overtones thus suggest, much like the eugenics movement did, that bodily perfection is a task only afforded to whiteness.

Heavily utilizing popular tropes of imperial expansion, *Tarzan* relies on the extreme exoticizing of Africa and its social cultures.

Depicted by Burroughs, and subsequent comic artists, as a place of “wonder, mystery, and danger,” Africa became a convenient backdrop associated with “ant-men and weird beasties,” its “primitive” geographies and peoples becoming fertile territory for playing out the once noble calling of the “White Man’s Burden” (Mautner 1-2). Undoubtedly, powerful echoes of the civilizing project can be detected in the Superman narrative. For instance, in John Byrne’s 1986 reboot of the Superman title, Lara—Superman’s Kryptonian mother—when presented with an image of her son’s potential new home, describes Earth as wild and uncontrolled, with the very sight of its savage habitants forcing her to recoil in horror. However, Jor-El reassures his wife that Earth’s yellow sun will provide their child with immense power, in time allowing him to become “the supreme being on that planet, almost a god” (6). It is understood that with this power Superman will grow to rule humanity, eventually instructing them in “proper Kryptonian ways” (6). It is the job of Superman, as presented by the patriarch Jor-El, to bare the burden of his Kryptonian superiority and subsequently civilize Earth’s people.

As evident in Byrne’s reboot, common eugenic themes of racial and technological perfection reach a climactic fruition in the creation of Superman’s home planet, Krypton. Although Krypton only registers as a minor blip in the first publication of *Superman*, Siegel and Shuster further develop its importance in their 1939 newspaper strip. Described as “so far advanced in evolution that it bears a civilization of supermen – beings which represent the human race at its ultimate peak of perfect development,” Krypton is the visualization of the eugenic dream (qtd. in Tye 40). Although Siegel and Shuster are certainly not proponents of the movement, it is my argument that the cultural influences at the time already had elements of eugenics infused within them. Comics scholar Chris Murray accounts for this process when he argues that the comic text is not solely “the work of writers, artists and editors,” but is rather “a ‘multi-dimensional’ space” where meaning is made (147). Comics are not only crafted through words and pictures, but by the discourses that circulate in and through culture. The acts of reading and viewing then become processes of engagement with these discourses and an understanding that they are implicitly acting with each other to produce meaning (Murray 150). It is therefore understandable how one can perceive popular eugenic sentiments

in Siegel and Shuster's work. Superman is thus not solely their creation but a product rendered through a variety of discursive forces, which ultimately produce a multiplicity of readings for the character.

### Eugenics Technologies and Transsexual Bodies

In the previous section, I have attempted to trace a cursory history of the eugenics movement's influence on comic books, and the Superman narrative, as well as foregrounding the continued preoccupation with the sight/site of the body. Moving forward, I extend the conversation further by similarly unpacking how the movement informed the development of gender confirmation surgeries and transsexual identities. By offering a similar meditation on these histories, I highlight the discursive touching-points that allow for a reading-together of Superman and transsexuality. Indeed, the very medium of comics books, and the genre of science fiction in general, offers another important example of these linkages, notably via the comic book forerunner—the pulp magazine. Pulp, which derived their name from the cheap wood pulp paper they were printed on, were known for their sensationalized stories and over-the-top cover art. As well as printing science fiction narratives (such as *Amazing Stories* and *Wonder Stories*), pulps also published horror (*Weird Tales*, *Terror Tales*), hero or crime stories (*The Shadow*, *Doc Savage*), and erotic fiction (*Focus*). Although pulps became the quintessential medium for outlandish and often-problematic narratives, they also created a space where flying men, monsters, caped crusaders, and supposed sexual deviants could mingle in textual interplay, a space that would translate itself into the comics it inspired. It is no coincidence then that the one of the first publishers of pulp science fiction magazines, Hugo Gernsback, was also the founder and publisher of *Sexology*—a magazine that often presented the “stranger side” of sex to a popular audience (Meyerowitz 32). Gernsback's professional and assumedly personal interests in the so-called bizarre signal an important discursive overlap between futuristic characters and the real-life individuals who defy contemporary understandings of the normatively sexed body.

Sexology as a study is the interdisciplinary, scientific investigation of human sexuality and what are now known as gender identi-

ties. The exact origins of the discipline are contestable but are commonly attributed to Richard Freiherr von Krafft-Ebing, who in 1886 published *Psychopathia Sexualis*. Although largely paired with Krafft-Ebing's work, sexology is also deeply linked to the eugenics movement, which sought to make public discourses of sex (Stern 184). In its quest to certify "fit" and "unfit" individuals through systemic, scientific measurements, eugenics opened up the possibility to study sex as a legitimate scholarly pursuit and also allowed public individuals an opportunity to discuss the often-taboo subject. In outing sex, eugenics sought to "take control of human existence by exposing individual sexual behavior and reproductive capacity to public intervention" (Burke and Castaneda 7). It is unsurprising then that Krafft-Ebing's work in sexology took on a pathologizing lens of "sexual inversions" (including homosexuality and/or sadomasochist practices, as well as cross-gendered identification) in an attempt to identify, diagnose, and treat so-called deviant individuals and behaviors. As Pat Califia suggests, "In the world of Krafft-Ebing, there is no such thing as a benign sexual variation. Everyone who departs from reproductive, monogamous, male-dominant heterosexuality is described as criminally insane" (13). However, Krafft-Ebing's work ironically created the frameworks for conceptualizing and articulating transsexuality and subsequently allowing individuals to medically transition genders (Prosser and Storr 75).

Among this first generation of sexologists, which includes Krafft-Ebing, were individuals such as Magnus Hirschfeld—a pioneering physician and activist—who attempted to pair some of the core eugenic beliefs regarding biology, heredity, and society with progressive attitudes toward sexual diversity. As a eugenicist, Hirschfeld believed in biological explanations for human behavior and "sexual intermediaries." He was often at odds with colleagues who viewed sexual nonconformity as a disease, as Krafft-Ebing did (Rudacille 37). Using the same scientific principles as his detractors, Hirschfeld argued instead that so-called deviants were simply natural evolutionary variations within the human species (Stern 175). Indeed, it was Hirschfeld himself who in 1910 first coined the term "transvestite" to describe a group of persons who "more or less dress themselves as [the opposite sex/gender] or live totally as such" (Hirschfeld 36-37). It is his study, *The Transvestites: The Erotic Drive to Cross-Dress*,

which began a language for thinking about and articulating transsexual identities.<sup>5</sup>

Hirschfeld continued to work on the topic of transvestism throughout the 1910s into the early 1930s. During this time, he established the Institute for Sexual Science where he performed and subsequently publicized a number of “sex reassignment surgeries,” as they were then known, on patients self-identifying as “transvestites” (Meyerowitz 15). However, only a few months after Hitler assumed power in 1933, Hirschfeld’s work was halted when the Institute in Berlin was vandalized and looted by a mob of Nazi students. Three days later the students returned to burn the Institute’s archives in public. The burning of Hirschfeld’s institute proved to be a significant shift in the cultural landscape of Germany, radically silencing the once-public discourses regarding sex and gender. Eugenics, which offered sexologists potentially liberatory methods for conceptualizing sexual and gender diversity, was immediately mutated and absorbed into the Nazi ethos (Bachrach 25).

## World War II

In the previous sections of this article, I have created a brief account of how the eugenics movement affected both Superman’s creation as well as Western medical histories of transsexuality. I have shown that the production of tomorrow and of the future human ideal (which the comic strip/book superhero embodies) cannot be unlinked from evolving surgical technologies that ensure a properly sexed and gendered body. I argue that these tethers reveal a connection between scientific discourses of eugenics, which have helped to materialize transsexual subjects and identities, and Superman himself, a figure whose creation is greatly influenced by these same discourses. In the following sections, I will present how the rhetorical deployment of the eugenics movement during World War II came to permanently and discursively fuse these histories together. It is a process that will eventually culminate during the Cold War, specifically upon the body of America’s first public transsexual, Christine Jorgensen.

World War II proved an ideological fighting ground between American militarism and Nazi fascism, which, in part, could only

materialize through the former's erasure of its own investment in eugenic experimentation. The eugenics movement, which both countries shared strikingly similar ideas on (Turda 38), became an entrance point for the American nation to create an ideological fantasy of itself as a tolerant, benevolent country of strength and morality. No iconic character came to symbolize this notion more than Superman, the pinnacle of "truth, justice and the American way" (*The Adventures of Superman*).

The first comic character to respond to the war in *Action Comics* #10, Superman became a quintessential figure in America's cultural and ideological fight against the Nazis. During the war, the army singlehandedly became the largest customer of comic books, shipping out single issues to GI's training at home and fighting abroad (Gabilliet 22). This was not the first time militarized masculinities and the cultural imagery of supermen had forged an economic and discursive bond. Hutchinson's magazine *The Superman* stemmed specifically from his own experience of WWI and the need to (re)glorify the white male body after it endured physical and psychological trauma on the battlefield (Brauer and Callen 27). In regards to WWII however, the army's economic investment in comics not only served to uplift soldier morale, it managed to rescue a dying genre that had been worsening in popularity (Gabilliet 34). It was therefore "against the Nazis and the Japanese that the superhero comic," as well as Superman, "came of age" (Costello *Secret Identity* 5).

While Superman's positioning as a symbolic national hero was part of a strategic effort to use popular culture as war propaganda (Murray 141), Superman himself never actually saw combat within the comic panels. In an attempt to honor the real troops and not provide false hopes to readers, Siegel and Shuster relegated the character's involvement to vigilantly protecting the country's vital production of war materials from underhanded crooks and saboteurs back at home (Tye 60). Superman, it would seem, would remain a local hero, making sure any underhanded scheming did not interrupt America's war efforts. Inevitably, Superman would catch small glimpses of the war abroad through special issue publications and various comic cover tableaux. In 1940, for example, Siegel and Shuster printed exclusively in *Look* magazine a detailed depiction of the hero's intervention into the war. Titled "How Superman Would End

the War,” the comic depicts Superman single-handedly fighting the Nazi army, grabbing both Hitler and Stalin, and taking both men to the League of Nations to face sentencing. After its publication, a copy of the comic eventually found its way to the writers of *Das Schwarze Korps*, the weekly newspaper of the SS. In their review of the piece, the writers make explicit anti-Semitic references to Siegel’s Jewish heritage and criticize Superman as being an oafish buffoon. The piece ends with the statement, “Woe to the American youth, who must live in such a poisoned atmosphere and don’t even notice the poison they swallow daily” (quoted in Bytwerk).<sup>6</sup>

On comic covers Superman was given small snippets of combat narratives that saw him “joining war dills, battling ‘Jappteurs,’ and standing up to ‘Mr. Schickelgrubber’ and his ‘so-called master race’,” as Larry Tye describes in his high-flying history of the Man of Steel (60). The author notes that these frozen action sequences “[made] the case without having to say it that the real *Übermensch* was on our side” (60, author’s own emphasis).<sup>7</sup> Tye’s analysis points to an interesting discursive collapse whereby America can reassert its stake in the eugenic goal of achieving human perfection. Superman, who overtly stands against the principles of eugenic idealism through his fight against Nazis powers, is subsequently converted (if he was not already) into a symbol of eugenic goals fully realized. Thomas Andrae aptly summarizes the paradoxical nature of this representation when he suggests that Superman “foreshadows mankind’s highest potentialities and profoundest aspirations but whose tremendous powers, remarkably, pose no danger to its freedom and safety” (89). It is assumedly only because Superman has learned down-home American morals from the Kents that he has chosen to use his powers for social betterment. In this respect, Superman became a testament to the power of American ideology and the goodness it embodies.<sup>8</sup>

This symbolic meaning is certainly a profound canonical shift as Siegel and Shuster’s character was first conceived to be a pain in the establishment’s side (Andrae 99-100). Originally intended to struggle against larger systemic injustices in an attempt to aid disenfranchised members of society, Superman by the mid-1940s had become a cog in the national war machine (Eco referenced in Andrae 100). His battle against evil, which began against corrupt politicians and violent domestic partners, became newly redirected against larger national targets



threatening the American people. Once acting as an operator outside the law, during the war years Superman became an “honorary policeman,” and his previous “radical individualism” was transformed into a “wholesale identification with the state” (Andrae 100). It is no coincidence that during this same time Superman’s chief archenemy became Lex Luthor, “a mad scientist bent on world domination” (Andrae 100). Lex Luthor acted as a perfect symbol for the Nazi state, which had already become synonymous with extreme scientific and technological experimentation in its quest for world dominion. Ironically, Superman would now battle against a character who stood for the very ideals of biological supremacy that allowed the hero to rise to his iconic national status in the first place. Harkening back to the original generic conventions outlined in the Frankenstein narrative, Superman sought to resist the very scientific ethos that gave him metaphorical life.

### Cold War Conclusions

If wartime saw Superman rise to unchallenged heights of glory, the Cold War would solidify the figure’s place in American culture. Additionally, the 1950s would also see the first public American transsexual, Christine Jorgensen, step out of the closet and rise to fame before a subsequent collapse in popularity. The aligning of these historical moments is not coincidental, but rather the outcome of building discursive forces regarding science, technology, medicine, and militarism throughout the twentieth century. It is not the goal in this concluding section to greatly detail Cold War-era politics and histories. Instead I present one key historical moment that appropriately summarizes the argument of this article: namely, that twentieth-century eugenic discourses intertwined particular understandings of the sexed body, technological/medical/scientific advancements, and human perfectibility in a way that would fundamentally influence the very structures of the superhero text. In other words, the genre of superhero comics cannot be unlinked from the same discursive forces that inform contemporary understandings of trans identities; these discourses are infused into the very panels of the superhero comic. Given this phenomenon, it is not coincidental that Christine Jorgensen would go on to perform the first embodied trans-ing of comics when she appeared as Wonder Woman during



a Las Vegas cabaret act.<sup>9</sup> Trans-ing, as opposed to alternative reading acts or textual practices like queering, aims to explore and explode the gender dynamics operating outside and within a certain text (Stryker, Currah, and Moore 13). To trans a comic character thereby evokes an alternative gendered reading position that disrupts or defies normative conceptualizations of the properly sexed body and histories or logics of narrative origin. It has been the purpose of this article not to show that one *can* trans Superman but that the figure is trans-ed already. To conclude, I wish to highlight Jorgensen's own time as a superhero, and how this performance acts as a living testament to the histories of discursive interweaving I have traced throughout this article.

In 1952, Christine Jorgensen made headlines when the *New York Daily News* ran the front-page headline "Ex-GI Becomes Blonde Beauty." Announced as the first American transsexual, Jorgensen rocketed into the American media making "sex change" a household term (Meyerowitz 51). In the accounts of her transition, via radio, television or newspaper interviews, Jorgensen repeatedly presented science as her saving grace. She celebrated her doctors, with their sophisticated understandings of the body—gleaned from Hirschfeld's work at the Institute—and praised them for restoring her to her natural gender (Meyerowitz 56). The elevation of science in Jorgensen's story is one element among many that allowed her to paradoxically occupy a safe spot in the public light during an era infused with rigid gender boundaries (Serlin 139). By deploying the space race rhetoric wherein science and technology are paired with salvation, Jorgensen crafted a narrative familiar to her public and one that positioned her as staunchly American, thus allowing her to defy any scrutiny of her gender, moral or mental character, and national allegiance. For example, in a letter addressed to her parents written in 1952, Jorgensen states, "Life is a strange affair and seems to be stranger as we experience more of it ... [we] strive through science to answer the great question of 'Why'—Why did it happen, where did something go wrong and, last but not least, what can we do to prevent it and cure it if it has already happened" (quoted in Serlin 154). Here, science and by proxy her doctors are positioned as saving figures who rescued Jorgensen from suffering "the no man's land of sex" (quoted in Serlin 156). What nature has wronged, science may right.<sup>10</sup>

The same rhetorical politics of the era were often deployed by comic book writers and artists, who in part attempted to halt the declining popularity of comics by capitalizing on the vigor and popularity of the space race. While other magazines championed the power of science and technology to “change any person’s sex” (Meyerowitz 41), comic books utilized the backdrop of the space race to craft new stories of American patriotism (Gabilliet 53). In his analysis of comics as popular propaganda, or “popaganda,” Chris Murray describes the 1950s space race as a time of heightened utopian ideals, specifically regarding the Atomic Age and its explicit investment in technology and science (149). Where technological and scientific invention were previously the mother of all consuming evil—as embodied by Luthor’s own villainy—the two were now seen as tools of moral good (as long as they rested in the right hands). Murray notes how the terrain of comic book covers again worked to solidify these ideological links. He draws specifically from *Action Comics* #101, published in 1946, which lays the groundwork for the coming Atomic Age. On the cover, Superman is seen filming an atomic blast from on high. Murray argues that Superman’s direct association with atomic power serves both the character and American investment in atomic energies equally: Superman’s documenting of the blast legitimates atomic power as a necessary defense against tyranny, and in turn Superman is legitimated as a proper defender of American democratic values (149).

The underscoring of one’s Americanness, via the support of science, technology and militarism, is continually reiterated in Jorgensen’s narrative – predominantly by outside reporters. In “Christine Jorgensen and the Cold War Closet,” David Harley Serlin traces how Jorgensen and her transition were positioned within the larger cultural trope of the soldier’s story, which due to the Korean War continued to have a strong hold on the public imagination. As he explains, headlines such as “Miss Jorgensen Returns from Copenhagen: Ex-GI Back ‘Happy to be Home’... made explicit the connection between Jorgensen’s arrival back in the United States and the soldier’s return home from war” (143). Indeed, he goes on to note,

even Christine’s parents framed the discussion of their (new) daughter’s transformation in terms of military service. In a *Daily News* piece, “Folks Proud of GI Who Became Blonde Beauty,” father George declared that

"[She] deserves an award higher than the Congressional Medal of Honor. She volunteered to undergo this guinea pig treatment for herself and to help others." Florence Jorgensen expressed the delight and frustration similar to that of many army mothers when she explained that, "You send a person over [to Europe] and you have a completely different person coming back." (145)

Couched within the grand narrative of American militarism, the potential anxieties Jorgensen's story and her transition could evoke become tempered by larger nationalist frameworks of duty, independence and survival. Furthermore, the language of Jorgensen's journey captured not only the "step from man to woman," as Meyerowitz points out, "but suggested a larger cultural leap from 'ex-GI,' the quintessential postwar masculine representation, to 'blonde beauty,' the hallmark of 1950s white feminine glamour" (62). The gendered aesthetic expressed by Jorgensen was further heightened by the press, which used a number of understood cultural conventions – such as fashion photography, behind-the-scenes reportage, and the reprinting of personal letters – to glamorize her life in a manner akin to Hollywood starlets (Serlin 141). Indeed, Jorgensen herself suggested that in order to prove her authenticity she had to in many respects surpass cultural idols of femininity, becoming "super-female," as to remove any masculine traits that may arouse suspicion (Meyerowitz 79). The discursive outcome of these various reporting styles and Jorgensen's own gender presentation effectively normalized her in the public's eye and "secured her reputation as a sterling example of what constituted a 'real American woman'" (Serlin 141). In other words, Jorgensen's gender identity was perceived as nonthreatening because it conformed to larger socially acceptable standards of femininity rooted in national ideologies of whiteness and heteronormativity.

Despite the positive attention, Jorgensen's fame would not last. Six months after the first breaking headline, it was reported that she did not "change her sex" (Serlin 140). Medical experts testified that Jorgensen did not receive a vaginoplasty in Copenhagen but underwent an orchidectomy, which involves solely the removal of the testes (Serlin 140). As Serlin notes, in less than a year Jorgensen abruptly went from "[American] 'glamour girl'... to medical oddity and psychological subject" (140). No longer able to support herself

through television, radio or newspaper interviews, Jorgensen agreed to headline in a prominent Las Vegas supper club-cabaret. After entertaining guests with comedic stories and autobiographical details of her transition, Jorgensen would end her number “parading around on stage dressed in a Wonder Woman costume and knee-high boots while holding ignited sparklers” (Serlin 159). As Serlin notes, though the costume can be read as a nod to her former military identity (during WWII, Wonder Woman also took up the fight by assisting the Allies), it is instead more salient to understand this performance within larger histories of displaying cultural and medical oddities for entertainment (159). Dressed as an “exaggerated cartoon,” Jorgensen became a “freak” on display (Serlin 159).

Although Wonder Woman has her own history apart from Superman, what I propose here is the fittingness of the costume imposed upon Jorgensen. What other result could there have been? Atop her body, the histories of comic superheroes and transsexuality merge in a tangibly visceral way that confirms a meaningful link between the two that cannot be ignored. Jorgensen, in her moment as Wonder Woman, performs the first trans-ing of a comic hero. She physicalizes the building discursive histories of science, technology, eugenics, militarism, and transsexuality, and reveals how ultimately all are coded within the comic text.

In reading these histories together, I have attempted to establish an alternative narrative that lays the foundational structures to re-evaluate not only Superman’s place within cis-heteronormative culture but all comic superheroes. While further scholarship needs to be done in this field, I have shown how this endeavor has very real and tangible discursive roots in preceding historical events. It is now time to extend the scope of comic studies and to enrich understandings of the superhero by attending to alternative readings positions as occupied by trans readers/fans.

Acknowledgements: This work was completed under the supervision of Dr. Jane Tolmie. Thanks goes to Dr. Tolmie and also to Dr. Eleanor MacDonald, who both provided sage guidance and support throughout the

writing process, as well as to Robin Alex McDonald for the extra pair of eyes. Additionally, thanks must be given to an anonymous reviewer who provided vital feedback on this article and a necessary dose of encouragement. The duration during which this work was completed was funded through Canada's Social Science and Humanities Research Council.

## Notes

1. In *Transgender History*, Susan Stryker defines the term transgender as referring to "those who identify with a gender other than the one they were assigned to at birth, as well as those who seek to resist their birth-assigned gender without abandoning it or those who seek to create a new kind of gender location" (19). While "transgender" or its abbreviated version "trans" is often used as an all-inclusive term to account for a number of identities across, along, or in resistance to the gender spectrum, the moniker "transsexual" specifically refers to "people who feel a strong desire to change their sexual morphology in order to live entirely as permanent, full-time members of the gender other than the one they were assigned to at birth" (Stryker 18). Discretion should be used when deploying the term "transsexual," as it is deeply connected to larger histories of medical and psychological pathologization. Reference to those histories will be made further in this article.

2. The prefix "cis-" means "on the same side of," hence "cis-gender" describes persons who identify with their birth-assigned sex/gender (as opposed to trans persons, who commonly resist their birth-assigned sex/gender) (Stryker 22). The "term cis-sexist" indicates a larger system of privileging whereby trans persons are understood as less authentically male or female, and are treated as inferior to their cis-counterparts.

3. Galton's reliance on the materiality of the body to reveal itself as 'degenerate' certainly opens up doors to exploring the concept of 'passing' and what it means for the body to reveal itself as Other. It stands outside the purview of this essay to engage in depth the history of passing as it pertains to the trans community and its ultimate reliance on larger histories of white supremacy.

4. See Alan Moore, Curt Swan, and George Pérez's *Whatever Happened to the Man of Tomorrow?* (1986). Additionally, see the sixteen-issue comic run *Superman: The Man of Tomorrow* (1995-1999), by Roger Stern, Tom Gammett, and Brett Breeding.

5. The medicalized identifier transvestite is the precursor to the diagnostic category transsexual. Transsexualism as defined—in part—by the desire

to change one's sexual morphology "did not appear as a medical category until the late 1940s and early 1950s, when doctors David O. Cauldwell and Harry Benjamin first coined and publicized the English term transsexual and when Christine Jorgensen first appeared in the press" (Meyerowitz 15). While many early transsexuals adopted the term as an identifier, many current trans folks opt not to use the label because of its place within pathologizing discourses.

6. Superman would face similar critique—albeit one free of overtly racist rhetoric—by psychologist Fredric Wertham in the 1950s. In his now infamous *Seduction of the Innocent*, Wertham argues that comic books are corrupting American youth, increasing teenage violence and delinquency, adolescent sexual promiscuity, and homosexual bonding. Wertham in his campaign against the genre also orchestrated numerous comic book burnings, providing a strikingly visual parallel to the Nazis' destruction of Hirschfeld's Institute (as discussed above).

7. The *Übermensch*, translated from German to mean "Overman," "Superman," or "Super-Human," is a concept developed by philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (1883). The *übermensch*, for Nietzsche, is the ideal in which humanity should aspire towards—although much debate remains as to the particular qualities and characteristics associated with this would-be embodiment of perfection. The term would later be picked up by the Nazi Party in the 1930s and became frequently used by Hitler to describe the biologically "superior" Aryan race.

8. Providing another retelling of the Superman origin story, the three-part mini series *Red Son* (also published by Elseworlds) questions what would have happened during the Cold War if the hero had landed in the Soviet Union instead of the United States of America.

9. I acknowledge that Superman and Wonder Woman do not share the same histories, both inside and outside the comic panel. Similar to Superman, Wonder Woman is innately born with super-human abilities, which are assumedly the product of her demigoddess ancestry. Belonging to the Amazons of Greek mythology, Wonder Woman was given her superpowers as a gift from the Greek Gods. It is my argument, however, that comic books as an artistic medium are fundamentally infused with the same discursive pre-occupations that produce trans subjects. It for this reason that we can read Jorgensen's act as an embodied "trans-ing" of the comic text.

10. The expression of self by trans individuals as feeling "trapped" in one's own body/skin continues to this day (although its origins are deeply connected to histories of pathologization and medical gatekeeping). Contemporary discourses of transitioning and of gender identity have begun to change this rhetoric and it should be noted that not all trans person's identity with this description.

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